

APPENDIX 3: LAND IN WISCONSIN OPEN TO THE PUBLIC FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION

Publicly-owned lands open for outdoor recreation

A. Federal

The **National Forest Service** owns 1,522,000 acres in Wisconsin as the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. Previously two separate properties that were both established in 1933, the forests were combined for administrative efficiency in 1993. The Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest offers the full spectrum of outdoor recreation opportunities that attract visitors from across northern Wisconsin and beyond. Its suite of developed campgrounds, less developed primitive camping areas, beaches, boat launches, picnic areas, non-motorized and motorized trails contribute economically and culturally to local rural communities.

The **U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service** (FWS) owns 149,500 acres in Wisconsin in seven National Wildlife Refuges and two Wetland Management Districts. The bulk of the FWS land in Wisconsin is within the refuges, the two largest being Necedah and Horicon. These two properties have a variety of facilities to support visitors and are among the most popular properties in the state for hunting and bird watching. In addition to the refuges, the FWS owns and manages over 50 Waterfowl Production Areas totaling over 13,000 acres in 17 counties throughout the state. The WPAs have very limited facilities.

The **National Park Service** owns 68,000 acres, primarily within the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore and the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway. These properties are managed to provide remote, wild experiences in two of the most spectacular settings in the state. A range of basic facilities are present.

The **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers** owns about 14,000 acres, primarily in the Mississippi River valley as part of the lock and dam system. The lands along the Mississippi River are cooperatively managed with the FWS as part of the Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge, which provides high-quality and diverse hunting and fishing opportunities that draw visitors from throughout the Midwest.

In addition to these lands, the Department of Defense (Army) owns over 60,000 acres in central Wisconsin as part of Fort McCoy and associated properties. Although access is regulated, the public can hunt, fish, trap, and cross-country ski on portions of the property.

B. State

The **Department of Natural Resources** (DNR) is the principal state agency providing places for outdoor recreation. The DNR owns 1.5 million acres spread across 71 of 72 counties (not Menominee County). These properties range from small boat launches to the 232,000-acre Northern Highland American Legion State Forest. The DNR manages the full range of facilities to accommodate outdoor recreation including hiking, biking, equestrian, snowmobile, ATV, and other types of trails, campgrounds, nature centers, picnic shelters, fishing piers, and wildlife watching blinds.

The DNR also owns easements along streams and rivers throughout the state to provide fishing opportunities and to manage critical streambank habitats. Many of these easements are along trout streams. Finally, the DNR owns public access easements across large blocks of forested lands as part of the federal Forest Legacy program. This program is designed to maintain healthy and economically viable working forests open to some forms of public recreation.

The **Board of Commissioners of Public Land** (BCPL) owns about 75,000 acres, mostly in northern Wisconsin. These lands, remnants of the millions of acres of land granted to the state by the federal government at statehood, are managed to provide quality forest habitat and an income stream to fund public education in the state. These lands have minimal facilities and are primarily used for hunting, trapping, fishing, and wildlife watching.

C. County

Counties provide a very wide diversity of opportunities for outdoor recreation. Most northern counties own large acreages that have been enrolled in the **County Forest** program. These lands, totaling over 2.3 million acres, primarily came to public ownership due to tax delinquency in the 1920s and 1930s following the mass clear-cutting of trees throughout the north combined with the country's economic collapse. Collectively, these lands now provide extensive trail networks, campgrounds, some of the best hunting and fishing in the state, and remote experiences.

In the southern part of the state is the award-winning Milwaukee County Parks program that consists of over 140 parks and nearly 15,000 acres. With facilities ranging from basketball courts to disc golf courses and swimming pools to botanical gardens, these properties receive millions of visits each year.

In between are countless county properties that provide a critical blend of natural areas and developed settings. Increasingly, many of Wisconsin's more populated counties host dog parks. The number and total acreage within county park, recreation, and conservation lands is not known, but is estimated to be about 70,000 acres.

D. Cities, Villages, and Towns

The bulk of participation in outdoor recreation in Wisconsin likely takes place on the many and varied city and village properties found throughout the state. With ball fields, playgrounds, urban trails, picnic sites, and many other facilities, these properties are easily accessible to the state's 3.6 million residents that live in urban settings. As such, they are typically heavily used on a daily basis. Excluding the City of Milwaukee (because the park land within the city is actually owned and managed by Milwaukee County), the nine largest cities in the state are estimated to hold over 15,000 acres of park, recreation, and conservation lands. If the remaining 180 cities and the 402 villages average 10 acres per 1000 residents,¹ that would encompass an additional 15,000 acres. With these assumptions, it is estimated that about 30,000 acres of park, recreation, and conservation lands are owned and managed by cities and villages in Wisconsin.

Some towns have small, but typically well-used, parks. There are 1,259 towns in the state. It is unknown how many towns have park and recreation properties, nor how large they average. If 25% of towns have park and recreation properties which average 5 acres, then towns in Wisconsin would hold about 1,500 acres. In sum, cities, villages and towns are estimated to hold about 31,500 acres of park and recreation land in Wisconsin.

E. School Forests

Over 230 school forests encompassing over 25,000 acres have been established throughout the state. These properties are heavily used as outdoor environmental education resources. Some also have physical education facilities, such as ropes courses. When the properties are not being used as part of educational programs, many are open to the general public for passive recreational uses. These forests are managed for (and to showcase) sustainable forest management. The school forest program is administered by Wisconsin's K-12 Forestry Education Program housed at UW-Stevens Point.

F. School and university properties

Wisconsin is home to over 2,200 public schools, nearly all of which have facilities to support outdoor recreation. For many students, these fields, playgrounds, and courts are where the majority of their participation in outdoor recreation takes place. Many of these properties are open to the public when school activities are not underway. The number and type of facilities and acres within these properties are unknown.

Some universities own and manage arboretums, botanical gardens, and other similar properties that are open to the public, generally for walking, photography, nature study, wildlife watching and similar activities. The number of these properties and acres within them are unknown.

¹ For many years the goal of 10 acres of park land per 1000 residents was a widely held standard. Today, communities recognize that there are many factors that go into determining appropriate goals for park land – some seek to achieve more than 10 acres, others fewer.

Privately-owned lands open for outdoor recreation**A. Non-profit organizations**

Nonprofit groups in Wisconsin have been actively involved in providing outdoor recreation opportunities for decades. These organizations own or have ownership interests in a range of properties throughout the state. Many of these groups are organized as land trusts and have land protection as a central goal for their operations.² Other nonprofit groups that have protected lands that are open to the public in Wisconsin include Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, the Trust for Public Land, and other similar organizations. The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship fund provides matching grants to nonprofit organizations for the acquisition of qualifying parcels. Lands acquired using Stewardship funds must be open to the public for hunting, trapping, fishing, hiking, and cross-country skiing unless an exemption is provided by the Natural Resources Board.

In addition, many other lands protected by land trusts in Wisconsin not subject to the Stewardship requirement are open to the public for fishing, hunting, hiking, wildlife watching, nature study and photography, and similar activities.

B. Managed Forest Law and the Forest Crop Law programs

Wisconsin's forest tax laws encourage sustainable forest management on private lands by providing a property tax incentive to landowners. Some of these privately held forest lands also allow public access for recreation. Lands enrolled under the Managed Forest Law program as "open" to public access (about 1.08 million acres) allow for hunting, fishing, hiking, sight-seeing, and cross-country skiing. Lands enrolled under the Forest Crop Law program (about 125,000 acres) allow for public hunting and fishing. Both tax laws require that all hunting and fishing follow the DNR hunting and fishing seasons and regulations.

C. Forest Legacy Program

The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) is a federal program that supports state efforts to protect environmentally sensitive forest lands. It was created in 1990 as part of the Farm Bill under the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Designed to encourage the protection of privately owned forest lands, FLP is an entirely voluntary program. To maximize the public benefits it achieves, the program focuses on the acquisition of partial interests in privately owned forest lands. FLP helps the States develop and carry out their forest conservation plans and encourages and supports acquisition of conservation easements, legally binding agreements transferring a negotiated set of property rights from one party to another, without removing the property from private ownership. Most FLP conservation easements restrict development, require sustainable forestry practices, and protect other values. Approximately 215,000 acres in Wisconsin have been protected under the FLP.

D. Voluntary Public Access

The Voluntary Public Access (VPA) program is administered by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and provides financial incentives to private landowners who open their property to public hunting, fishing, trapping and wildlife observation. Funding was authorized in the 2008 and 2014 Farm Bills. Enrollment in the program and use of these lands has grown steadily since inception and now encompasses about 41,000. VPA properties are located in roughly 50 counties across the state.

E. Snowmobile Trails on Private Lands

There are over 22,000 miles of groomed snowmobile trails across Wisconsin. The trails are open to the public and located on both private and public property with most trails maintained and groomed by volunteer members of the over 600 snowmobile clubs in the state. Club members work with willing landowners to get permission to cross private property. A great majority—over 85%—of the miles of trails are located on private lands, typically across agricultural lands that are not in use during the winter. Willing landowners allow these trails through agreements with clubs and a county's trail recreation departments.

² Gathering Waters is an umbrella organization that provides a range of services to local land trusts in Wisconsin. A map and list of land trusts operating in the state is on their website at <http://gatheringwaters.org/about-land-trusts/find-a-local-land-trust/>.

F. Businesses

A large number of privately owned businesses and enterprises provide places or opportunities for the public to participate in outdoor activities. Examples include campgrounds, marinas, golf courses, ski hills, and horse stables. There is not a central database of these enterprises and as such their number and distribution is easily quantifiable.